



# American Council of the Blind

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1703 N. Beauregard St., Suite 420, Alexandria, VA 22311 • Tel: (202) 467-5081 • Fax: (703) 465-5085

**June 29, 2016**

Honorable Tom Wheeler, Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SE  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: Comments on FCC 2016 CVAA Biennial Report to Congress (CG Docket No: 10-213)

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

The American Council of the Blind (ACB) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Federal Communications Commission (Commission) request for input on its draft 2016 biennial report to Congress on the implementation of the 21st Century Communications & Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA).

ACB is the nation's leading grassroots consumer-based advocacy group for Americans who are blind and visually impaired. With over 20,000 members, ACB is comprised of 70 state and special-interest affiliates. ACB played a vital part in the development and passage of the CVAA, which made significant advancements in the accessibility to mobile and telecommunications media providers. Subsequently, ACB has been actively involved with government and industry to assure that the intent of the CVAA remains a priority for the Commission, and that accessibility standards are met with great consideration toward the consumer's best interest.

In paragraph 7 of the request for comments, the Commission seeks input on the accessibility of services and equipment, with a focus on non-mobile landline and advanced communication systems (ACS) devices, and regular and/or smart mobile/wireless devices. From a blindness perspective, there have not been significant advancements in recent years for products associated with traditional telephone services. Accessible products do exist in the marketplace, such as telephones that announce incoming callers; however, solutions for manufacturers of VOIP systems such as those used in the workplace still remain inadequate. In our own national office, ACB continues to find deep frustration with the inability for VOIP to have an easy-to-use built-in solution for accessibly navigating and using what is essentially the traditional desk-top telephone.

Conversely, recent years have seen great improvements in the development and availability of mobile and wireless communications. As the world relies more and more on smart phones with access to the Internet and other ACS, the major software developers within this industry have made great strides toward increasing accessibility. This year, ACB will present Apple with its Robert S. Bray Award during the 2016 ACB national convention in Minneapolis. No doubt, Apple has lead the way toward revolutionizing the way people who are blind can communicate via mobile ACS. They have created an accessible ecosystem for application developers, who have

in turn created a marketplace for life-changing accessible solutions that have enhanced the independence of people who are blind or visually impaired. Google and its Android environment are on equal footing; over the past two years, the company has been working hard to make their user experience more accessible for people with disabilities. ACB has been working with both Apple and Google, and has recently ramped up over the past six months its relationship with Microsoft. Headed into the 6th anniversary of the CVAA, it is clear that these three industry leaders have demonstrated a genuine desire to achieve equal access for consumers who are blind or visually impaired. Major telephone carriers like AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint have also been engaged with ACB over the past two years. This engagement includes participation at national consumer conferences, at annual convening's like the M-Enabling Summit, and through frequent stakeholder calls.

Through these partnerships, various covered entities have been able to develop products that have accessible technology built into the operating systems, and available via multiple carriers at multiple price points, making universal access equal in cost to the average consumer. While there remain some concerns over third-party developers of mobile apps and minor fixes to assure quality control, the landscape for accessibility has definitely been transformed as a direct result of the CVAA.

In paragraph 9, the Commission requests further information on existing accessibility gaps. As it pertains to mobile devices, the gap mainly exists around third-party developers not adhering to accessibility guidelines established by both Apple and Google for their respective mobile operating systems. Concerns do arise on occasion when operating systems and apps are updated, and new features have not been adequately tested. ACB continues to work with the leading manufacturers and developers to get ahead of the curve for assuring products will be accessible when they launch. This has historically been an issue with third-party app developers, and it should be noted that the number of inaccessible apps continues to shrink from past years, but in no way has been eliminated. Google's Android platform has more recently been pushing out updates to their accessibility settings, which has fixed a number of bugs and quirks with the usability of access software, and ACB has been pleased to see these improvements that have made Google more equal in regards to accessibility with Apple, who remains the other dominant force in this industry.

As for areas of growth and opportunity, ACB believes there is still room for accessible devices on the lower end of the spectrum. For example, making accessible smart phones available to individuals who are blind or visually impaired on fixed or limited incomes would give them significant opportunities for greater community inclusion and independence. The accessible smart phone has become a major barrier breaker for independence, overcoming many challenges to blindness such as navigation, access to data, and social interaction. Where a website may still be inaccessible, individuals with vision loss are discovering mobile applications are easy to navigate, demonstrating the tangible impact of the CVAA within our community. The European manufacturer Odin provides a low-cost entry level phone that has accessibility built in, and U.S. distribution of this product has been targeting our affiliates to inform them of programs that will help subsidize the cost of the phone.

In paragraph 10, the Commission requests feedback on access to information in a reasonable format. To date, we have received positive feedback from major device carriers such as AT&T, Sprint, and Verizon, who provide print materials in alternative formats like Braille. They also have customer service representatives trained across an array of accessibility issues. Feedback

has been much more positive toward mobile providers than other covered entities like cable providers toward access to accessible devices and how to use them.

In regards to paragraph 11, requesting information on the accessibility to ACS as non-interconnected VOIP and video-messaging services, ACB has seen solid effort by Microsoft to improve its complete range of software. This includes being accessible on the Apple Macintosh operating software ecosystem, which had not been at all accessible with Apple's screen-reading technology until recent years. They have also made strong improvements with their cloud platform and included major fixes and improvements to their last major Windows update. Similarly, Google has recently updated its internal screen-reading software solution for its Chrome operating environment, which has made improvements in usability and quality control.

In paragraph 12, the Commission requests information on mobile Internet browsers and how covered entities have been market testing and engaging with consumers. Since the passage of CVAA, there have been significant improvements on mobile web browsing. So much of the innovation has focused on app development. However, the major smart phone competitors Apple iOS and Google Android continue to improve usability. This includes the use of improved hand gestures to navigate web content, making web access more efficient from a usability vantage. Apple, Google, and Microsoft continue to stay engaged with our members, participating at our annual convention, where they receive vital feedback and update consumers on new accessible product improvements. This allows consumers to test products before they visit their local retailer, who may not be an expert on accessible technology within the products they sell. AT&T has introduced a "Train the Trainer" model for their store managers, with a focus on accessible technology from a customer service relationship. Since most smart phones can now come with built-in accessibility, the former engagements demonstrate that consumers can enter their local store armed with the knowledge necessary to make smart choices for the best product to meet their accessibility needs.

In paragraph 14, the Commission seeks input on barriers in regards to new technologies. One area of concern that ACB continues to struggle with is the shift toward online web conferencing, in place of traditional teleconferencing. ACB remains concerned that there are major barriers, particularly among leading web conferencing providers, toward equal access for those with vision loss. Systems that rely on converting accessible material into a video stream that is then broadcast on the user's screen for presentations remains inaccessible for users who are blind or visually impaired. With the capabilities in pushing through large data like the recent trends toward 360 video streaming and virtual reality (VR) environments, it seems difficult to believe that no easy solution has been developed to convey accessible media in a web conference setting. Furthermore, as mobile devices are used more and more for viewing entertainment media, ACB believes there could be greater access to audio description, and accessible ways to deliver such content to the end user.

In closing, ACB commends the Commission's efforts to strengthen further implementation of the CVAA. The Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) continues to bring together industry and advocates. Through the DAC and other stakeholder engagement opportunities born out of the CVAA, there is no question that the tech industry and consumers with disabilities can work together toward finding accessible pathways to equal access. To this end, improvements can still be made through broadening the network of stakeholder interactions and partnerships, in order to bring together advocates with a more diverse and wider range of covered entities under the CVAA. This will be particularly important as new technologies enter into the marketplace.

Our hope is that the CVAA can provide a road map for the future of advanced telecommunication systems, and our hope has been reaffirmed by the due diligence the Commission has taken toward implementing the spirit of the legislation.

If you have questions pertaining to these comments, or need further information, please do not hesitate to contact ACB. We appreciate the opportunity to work with the Commission toward promoting true universal access — embracing programming that is all-inclusive — and look forward to working with the Commission as it moves forward with its proposed rule.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anthony Stephens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Anthony" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Stephens".

Anthony Stephens  
Director of Advocacy and Governmental Affairs  
American Council of the Blind